Blog Post: Torah- Centered Judaism and the Rabbinics Classroom

By Rabbi Joshua Cahan
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If you are a Jewish educator looking to teach Talmud outside of the Orthodox world, you will probably end up teaching high school. Outside of seminaries, high school students spend more hours a week studying Jewish texts, and are more likely to study them in the original, than any other group in the US. This makes the Jewish high school an ideal setting for a rich conversation about what in-depth Jewish learning should look like in the non-Orthodox world. It is a setting that demands real answers to the question that bedevils visions of our communal future: what precisely is the Jewish content that should fill in our vague dedication to Jewish Continuity?

The most important conversation, I would argue, centers around the teaching of Rabbinics. In a Jewish day school, there are three main formal contexts in which Jewish content is taught. One is tefilla, prayer; the second is Bible; and the third is Rabbinics. For our purposes, I will define Rabbinics as the study of the texts and ideas of the Rabbinic tradition. Rabbinics as a discipline is unique to day schools – it is not taught in Hebrew schools because of its breadth and complexity. Only day schools can devote the time necessary to penetrate it.

Rabbinics is key to every aspect of Judaism as we know and live it. While prayer is an essential component of religious experience, and Bible is the starting point of Jewish study, the Judaism that we have inherited and that we live today is Rabbinic Judaism. It is the product of rabbincic categories, modes of thought, and methods of interpretation. It is a reflection of the rabbincic vision of a robust life lived in the service of God. Any serious discussion of Jewish Continuity must begin with immersion in the debates and deliberations of generations of rabbincic writing – that is the history which we are continuing! Thus, how we teach our students to situate themselves in Jewish tradition is largely a function of how we choose to teach Rabbinics.

Our Rabbinics curriculum should press us to ask crucial questions about what it means to cultivate Jewish identity in the 21st century. What types of encounter with Torah should we be creating for our students? What exactly will inspire young adults to make a passionate and long-term commitment to Torah and to the community that is its steward? In the vast world of Rabbincic tradition, what types of content should we prioritize? How do we define our main objectives?

There are, of course, no singular answers to these questions. Part of the reason that Jewish Continuity has remained undefined is that it is the only thing people from all segments of the Jewish world can agree on. But avoiding these questions has been a real mistake. We are
immeasurably enriched by open dialogue between educators with differing values and goals. We better articulate our own views, are challenged to consider new approaches, and are able to find common ground. Most of all, the process of debating Torah’s many meanings together itself creates a shared communal identity, despite, or even because of, our diversity.

Unfortunately, in the real world of Jewish high schools, Rabbinics has been less the defining element of the Judaics curriculum than its most ill-defined part. Prayer and Bible are reasonably well-defined areas of study, though there are certainly major variations in practice. We know more or less what content is being taught and to some degree why. Rabbinics, on the other hand, has always been the great Black Hole of the day school curriculum. There is not even consensus on the very basic question of what type of material such a course should cover. Is it a Talmud class or an overview of Judaism and Jewish values? Does it focus on rabbinic texts, or is it a catch-all that brings in Jewish philosophy and literature?

Rabbinics teaching in non-Orthodox schools has, as a consequence, often been disorderly and haphazard. Material was often chosen with no careful reflection on the overall goals for a Rabbinics curriculum. Each teacher in a school would teach material they liked or were comfortable with, with little coordination of methods or approaches. Teachers within a single department often taught entirely different subjects under the common rubric of “Rabbinics”.

There are many reasons for this. First, In the vast world of rabbinic literature, there are no obvious choices. Unlike Bible, Rabbinic Literature offers no clear storyline or progression, leaving teachers to select material based solely on personal preference. Second, Rabbinic texts are more foreign and less accessible to our students than biblical or liturgical texts. Many Rabbinics teachers have tended to focus either on making Rabbinics enjoyable or on teaching basic language skills, losing sight of longer-term curricular concerns. Third, what is being taught has been influenced by who has been asked to do the teaching. It takes years of intensive work to develop real facility in Talmud, and generally few of those who do so have looked to teach outside of the Orthodox world. With limited access to that level of expertise, schools turned to educators with more general Jewish knowledge to fill the gap, reducing the amount and/or the depth of the rabbinic texts being taught.

Moreover, many of today’s non-Orthodox Jewish high schools are less than 10 years old. They began without clear models of what teaching Rabbinics should look like, and have been trying to make decisions on the fly. There are many different perspectives on what should be taught – parents, administrators, and teachers often have widely diverging ideas about how much and what types of rabbinic material is worth teaching. Even determining who makes such decisions is a complex process.

All of this has begun to change. Rabbinics faculties at schools around the country are starting to think seriously about these challenges. Individual educators are examining Rabbinics teaching through the lens of curricular design. Experienced educators have also been joined by an influx of new teachers with deeper expertise in Rabbinic Literature. In addition to the established seminaries and education schools, there is a network of new institutions that offer extensive Talmud training in a progressive framework. For alumni of the Pardes Educators’ Program, the Conservative Yeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, and other programs, pluralistic schools are a natural home.

Moreover, as several of the newer high schools grow into maturity, teachers who move between schools have begun to share methods, materials, and philosophies of teaching
Rabbinics. Academic work from Jon Levisohn and colleagues at the Mandel Center at Brandeis University, especially the work of “The Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies”, have begun to more clearly define the competing goals and concerns that Rabbinics teachers balance and to challenge some of our assumptions about how to reach those goals. We are in a position to have a richer community-wide conversation about what it means to teach Rabbinics, and thus to shape a concept of “Judaism” for our students, than we could ever have had before.

Rabbinics educators should seize this moment to start treating Rabbinics as a discipline. We must start talking about these big picture questions not only within schools, but across schools as well. We need to discuss what the study of Rabbinics should be in our schools and how we get there. To do that, we need to start to develop clear language in which to describe both our goals and our methods. A common language will allow us to have a real conversation about the merits and challenges of different orientations toward rabbinic texts, in Levisohn’s language. We need to challenge ourselves to more carefully define our goals; to more precisely pair methods with goals; and to look together for effective ways to test our methods and assess whether and to what extent we have achieved those goals.

The product of such a dialogue will not be a single set of guidelines for what specific content schools should be teaching or which goals are most valuable. Articulating and teaching a Judaism worth upholding is not about choosing a single truth – we know that there is no such thing.

Rather, such a dialogue can clarify the bases and challenges of different approaches, so that curricular decisions reflect a school’s values and vision. It can challenge us to continuously question and refine our practice and to consider different approaches to both understanding and teaching this material. Most of all, it would be the beginning of a profoundly important conversation about what rabbinic texts should mean in a non-Orthodox context. This is a conversation that needs multiple voices and perspectives, experienced educators who are prepared to learn from each other.

The lessons we learn from such a dialogue have the potential to transform how we think about the challenge of building the Jewish future. They can help us to recover the core values that should animate our work. Our Rabbinics classrooms, like our communities, should be constantly engaged with a principle that, despite its importance, is too easily sidelined: the belief that a serious and expansive conversation about the many different ways to approach our texts and tradition can itself serve as the core around which a truly modern Judaism can flourish.

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